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Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, speaks at a news conference at the Vatican March 14 about study groups authorized by Pope Francis to examine issues raised at the synod on synodality. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Pope Francis has decided that some of the most controversial issues raised at the first assembly of the Synod of Bishops on synodality will be examined by study groups that will work beyond the synod's final assembly in October.

The possible revision of guidelines for the training of priests and deacons, "the role of women in the church and their participation in decision-making/taking processes and community leadership," a possible revision of the way bishops are chosen and a revision of norms for the relationship between bishops and the religious orders working in their dioceses all will be the subject of study groups.

That Pope Francis did not wait until the end of the second assembly to convoke the study groups, "shows that he has a heart that listens; he listened and is acting," Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the synod, told reporters March 14.

Pope Francis approved the 10 groups and their topics; he asked the groups, coordinated by different offices of the Roman Curia, to make a preliminary report to the synod's second assembly in October and to give him a final report on their work by June 2025.

Msgr. Piero Coda, secretary general of the International Theological Commission, a papally-appointed body that serves the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, said the groups "certainly" will discuss specific issues such as the possibility of women deacons, the involvement of laypeople in the choice of bishops and a greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ Catholics.

In a letter to Grech, released March 14, Pope Francis said that with the study groups working on issues "requiring in-depth study," members of the synodal assembly in October will be able "to focus more easily on the general theme that I assigned to it at the time, and which can now be summarized in the question: 'How to be a synodal Church in mission?'"

Pope Francis named the 10 themes to be explored by the study groups and provided references to where those themes were discussed in the first assembly's synthesis report (SR) in October:

- "Some aspects of the relationship between the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Church. (SR 6)
- "Listening to the Cry of the Poor. (SR 4 and 16)
- "The mission in the digital environment. (SR 17
- "The revision of the 'Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis' (guidelines for priestly formation) in a missionary synodal perspective. (SR 11)
- "Some theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial forms. (SR 8 and 9)
- "The revision, in a synodal missionary perspective, of the documents touching on the relationship between Bishops, consecrated life and ecclesial associations. (SR 10)
- "Some aspects of the person and ministry of the Bishop — criteria for selecting candidates to Episcopacy, judicial function of the Bishops, nature and course of 'ad limina Apostolorum' visits — from a missionary synodal perspective. (SR 12 and 13)
- "The role of Papal Representatives (nuncios) in a missionary synodal perspective. (SR 13)
- "Theological criteria and synodal methodologies for shared discernment of controversial doctrinal, pastoral and ethical issues. (SR 15)
- "The reception of the fruits of the ecumenical journey in ecclesial practices. (SR 7)"

Grech and Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, relator general of the synod on synodality, met privately with Pope Francis before the news conference. Grech said that during the meeting, Francis approved inviting to the synod assembly four additional representatives of other Christian churches and communities, so that in October there will be 16 "fraternal delegates."

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In addition, Archbishop Filippo Iannone, prefect of the Dicastery for Legislative Texts, told reporters a commission already is studying possible revisions to the Eastern and Latin codes of canon law with a focus on strengthening "synodality," or the

participation of all the baptized in the life and mission of the church while respecting the different forms of service to which laypeople and clerics are called.

And, Grech said, the synod secretariat has convoked five working groups to focus on: building synodality in dioceses; building synodality on a national or regional level; increasing synodality in the universal church, including by exploring "the relationship between the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, episcopal collegiality and ecclesial synodality"; ways to ensure a "synodal method" of operating that includes prayer, listening, discernment and liturgy; and looking at the identity of the church as a community promoting unity with diversity, whether of culture, language or customs.

In a note on "perspectives for theological exploration" in preparation for the synod's second assembly, the synod secretariat said the goal was to ensure "reciprocity between evangelization of culture and inculturation of the faith, giving space to local hermeneutics, without 'the local' becoming a reason for division and without 'the universal' turning into a form of hegemony."

The whole point of synodality, the note said, is "credibly and effectively manifesting and supporting" the church's mission, "which is the ultimate criterion of all discernment. What is most effective in terms of the proclamation of the Gospel must be privileged, finding the courage to abandon what proves to be less useful or even an obstacle."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.
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